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Saddam Husayn
Likely To Hang On ☐

National Intelligence Estimate

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NIE 92-7

Saddam Husayn: Likely To Hang On

*Information available as of 12 June 1992 was used
in the preparation of this National Intelligence Estimate.*

*The following intelligence organizations participated
in the preparation of this Estimate:*

The Central Intelligence Agency
The Defense Intelligence Agency
The National Security Agency
The Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research,
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The Director for Intelligence,
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The Office of Intelligence Support,
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The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence,
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Department of the Air Force
The Director of Intelligence,
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Figure 1. A defiant Saddam at a rally in northern Iraq. (FOUO) Vanity Fair ©

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Key Judgments

Saddam Husayn: Likely To Hang On

Saddam Husayn is likely to survive the political and economic challenges of the next year. Although he is significantly weaker than he was before the Gulf war, he appears stronger than he was a year ago. The only real threat to Saddam remaining in power over the next year is from a sudden, violent effort to remove him by one or more people with access to him.

If we are wrong in our judgment about Saddam's survival, it is most likely in underestimating the current degree of unhappiness in the military and in the Sunni core that have provided Saddam's base of power. Important individuals in the inner circle and in the Republican Guard might be ready to mount a coup against Saddam. A popular revolt is much less likely.

Saddam will continue to use the Army, the Republican Guard, and intelligence and security forces to stifle dissent, reassert his control over Iraq, and prevent the emergence of any potential rival. The resumption of Air Force fixed-wing flight activity in April probably added to public perceptions that the regime is growing stronger and that citizens are powerless to bring about change.

Economic sanctions alone are not likely to bring about Saddam's removal, but they will contribute to public disaffection with his leadership. Sanctions may also be increasing popular resentment toward the West. Despite sanctions, Saddam has managed to maintain his core support group by providing goods and services not available to the masses. Saddam probably believes that Iraq has withstood the brunt of the sanctions and that international support for sanctions is flagging.

Saddam will continue to test coalition resolve by using economic pressure and increasingly intimidating military positioning against the Kurds in northern Iraq. Should Provide Comfort not be extended, he would be freer to expand his operations in the north—and may hope for Turkish collusion in suppressing the Kurds. He will also be more likely to act against the Kurds if he thinks they are acquiring attributes of statehood. In addition, his success in restricting international attention to the plight of the Shias in the marshlands of southern Iraq permits him to carry out a ruthless, but probably only partially effective, military campaign against them.

Discussion

Saddam Holding On

Saddam Husayn is not the strongman he was before the Gulf war, but his regime continues to demonstrate an ability to survive. Indeed, Saddam's position appears to be gradually improving, and the regime is now more secure than it was a year ago. []

Tightening His Grip

To maintain his personal security, Saddam will continue to isolate himself from all but his most trusted colleagues and family members. Saddam has reorganized the military and security services to provide additional protection for him, his family, and his regime. Significant Republican Guard and other key security services still surround Baghdad, acting as a formidable barrier to disgruntled military or other foes of the regime. []

Saddam's policy of generously rewarding relatives and cronies, along with fierce and swift punishment of those with suspected loyalties, is likely to ensure the continued support of his inner circle. They probably have also accepted his argument that only he can keep Iraq together and are fearful of retribution from the population if Saddam is no longer there to hold the regime intact. In addition, his pervasive security networks combined with the fear of purges, executions, and retribution will serve to restrain other potential opposition. According to exile and press accounts that we credit but cannot confirm, Saddam's security services continue to round up suspected coup plotters and disaffected military personnel. []

The Iranian airstrike in early April on a dissident camp inside Iraq may have highlighted the vulnerability of Iraq's borders, but it also gave Saddam an excuse to resume Air Force fixed-wing flight operations and bolstered his case for lifting international

sanctions. Should Iran strike into Iraqi territory again, Iraq would probably react with its air defense weapons, including the launching of interceptors if sufficient early warning were available. The operations by Iraqi fixed-wing aircraft, which many Iraqis apparently believed had been prohibited under the terms of the cease-fire, is probably taken by Iraqi citizens as an indication that the coalition is easing its opposition to Saddam. []

Extending His Reach in the South

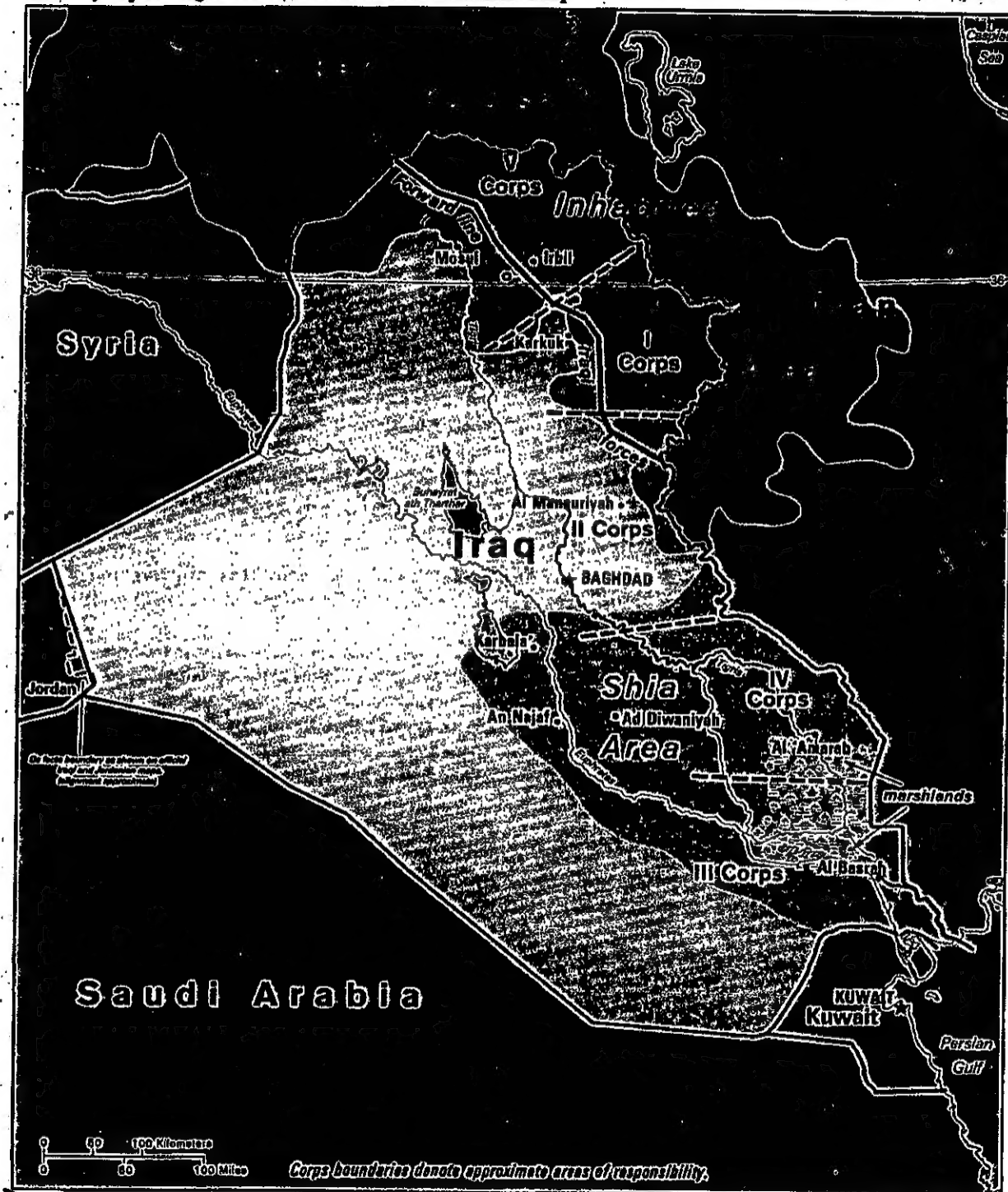
Saddam is moving to reassert his authority beyond Baghdad, especially in southern Iraq, where the Shia rebels still operate. Saddam is aggressively probing the coalition to see if it is willing to enforce UN Resolution 688. He is demonstrating growing confidence that he will not be punished for his actions. []

Saddam's ability to limit access of international observers and relief workers in the south gives him a freer hand to conduct military operations in the marshlands in an effort to end the persistent, low-level Shia insurgency. He is also depriving the Shias of adequate food and medical supplies and limiting their access to the holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala'. These tactics will set back the Shia insurgency but will probably not put it out of business. []

He probably sees the Shias as a more serious long-term threat to his regime than the Kurds. As his forces extend their sway over the marshes, Saddam will probably begin forcibly resettling Shia villagers in other regions where they can be more easily controlled. []

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Figure 2
Military Operating Areas in Northern and Southern Iraq



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Pressure on the Kurds

Saddam has not given up his designs to reimpose complete control over northern Iraq's strategic cities and resources, including some oil facilities. At the same time, he seeks to avoid a major confrontation with Operation Provide Comfort:

- Saddam can be expected to continue to exploit differences among the Kurdish leaders in an effort to undermine their ability to maintain cohesion and control.
- He will rely on his internal economic embargo of the north, now in its eighth month, coupled with a virtual military blockade of the region.
- Iraqi forces will continue to harass UN relief workers and impede their efforts in the north.
- Roughly half of Iraq's ground forces are deployed in a defensive line facing the Kurdish-controlled areas in the north. The layered air defense system—including mobile SAMs—could be activated quickly. []

Saddam could significantly step up military operations against the Kurds with little advance notice. But he probably will not mount a military offensive while Operation Provide Comfort remains in place. Instead, he will rely on steady military and economic pressure to try to divide the Kurdish political leadership, at some point slice away territory held by the Kurdish Front, and undermine the results of the precedent-setting Kurdish election. He will also step up efforts to woo Turkey into tacit cooperation against their mutual opponents—Kurdish insurgents—hoping to undermine, if not end, Turkish tolerance for Provide Comfort. We estimate these tactics will not be successful in stopping the drift toward greater Kurdish autonomy. []

If the Turkish parliament does not extend Provide Comfort—upsetting the conventional wisdom that it will extend—Saddam would feel freer to expand his operations in the north. He would probably initiate military operations, but would still want to avoid provoking a major refugee crisis and risking a return of international forces. []

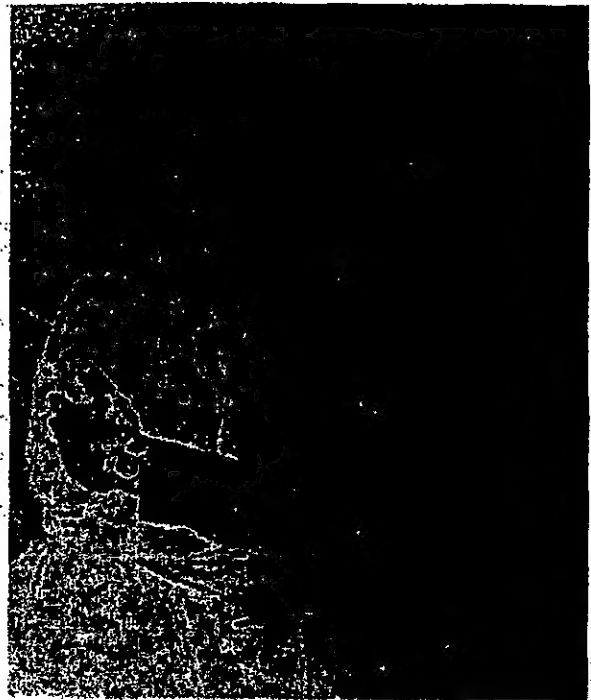


Figure 3. Saddam and Kurdish leader.
Talabani. []

AFP ©

Even if Provide Comfort remains, Saddam could decide to act more provocatively if he perceives actions by the new Kurdish Assembly as a prelude to independence—if the Kurds acquired greater foreign financial investment, become more involved politically, and showed some progress in creating a consolidated military force. []

Coping With Economic Pressures

Saddam has made progress in coping with Iraq's economic problems, has begun to reconstitute Iraq's military, and has begun to restore special weapons programs. Many war-damaged economic facilities have been repaired, although the fixes, in many cases, are piecemeal and fragile. Baghdad rejected the terms of UN Resolutions 706 and 712, which would allow for limited oil sales to purchase humanitarian goods, fund UN monitoring activities in Iraq, and pay

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reparations for the Gulf war. Were he to accept those resolutions, oil could flow within a week through the Turkish pipeline, and he could earn over \$900 million over six months, according to the terms of the UN resolution. His other sources of revenue are likely to remain gold sales, forward oil sales, some concessional loans from friendly governments, and collateralized credit. []

Saddam may believe that support for UN sanctions is weakening and that he can outlast them. He probably views the troubles the UN is facing in funding its operations, including the guard force stationed primarily in northern Iraq, and the willingness of some Security Council members to modify the terms of UN Resolutions 706 and 712 as evidence that international resolve to continue confrontation with Iraq is flagging. []

Saddam's Survival Likely Over the Near Term

We believe Saddam is likely to survive the challenges to his rule, at least for the next year or so:

- No leader has emerged inside Iraq to challenge Saddam. Even the hint of dissatisfaction with the regime is sufficient to invite arrest, execution, and confiscation of a family's property. Few Iraqis are willing to run that risk.
- Political change, if and when it comes, is likely to be sudden, brutal, and unpredictable.
- Members of the opposition in exile—Arab and Kurdish, Sunni and Shia, secular and Islamic—have little in common other than their hatred of Saddam and have little support inside the country. They continue to compete for foreign attention and have made little headway in agreeing on a joint program of action.
- Saddam has been able to deliver sufficient food, medicines, and other consumer goods to the Sunni Arab cities and tribes that have long been his base of support and the primary source of manpower for the Republican Guard, the Ba'th Party, and the security services. Any easing of sanctions would bolster Saddam's claim that he can protect his supporters from the hardships of sanctions. It

Saddam's Neighbors: Adapting to His Survival

None of Iraq's neighbors—key Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran—have the military and economic means or the political influence to be major players in deciding Saddam's fate. The neighbors almost certainly are dismayed that Saddam has survived, and so far they have shown little interest in reaching an accommodation with Baghdad. Pressure to reestablish normal relations with Iraq and to resume economic ties is likely to build the longer Saddam remains in power. A rearming Iran is a further complication, placing Iraq's Gulf neighbors under cross-pressures to decide which state poses more of a threat to their interests: Iran or Iraq. For now, we see a fairly consistent pattern of:

- Continued expressions in diplomatic circles of opposition to Saddam and his regime.
- Reluctance to take significant public measures against Saddam for fear of arousing latent popular sympathy for Iraq.
- Willingness to maintain nominal compliance with UN sanctions, which affect few Arab economies significantly other than Jordan's.
- Gradual drift in some coalition states from willingness to support new military action if necessary.
- Probable readiness to meddle in internal Iraqi affairs once the end of Saddam's regime is in sight. []

[See Jordan NIE 92-5: Jordan's Violation of UN Sanctions Against Iraq: Why the King Won't Plug the Leak []]

would also probably allow him to divert other financial resources to his top priority—the rebuilding of Iraq's military forces and capabilities.

- Saddam continues to exploit ethnic divisions to bolster his position as "unifier." Ironically, his continued efforts in this area—while successful in maintaining his hold on power—will serve to undermine rather than preserve Iraq's integrity in the long run.

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What If We're Wrong?

Our judgment about Saddam's survival is based more on our understanding of the history of Iraqi authoritarianism, public passivity, and the behavior of this regime than on reliable current intelligence. []

The greatest likelihood of being wrong is in underestimating the current degree of unhappiness in military circles and in the Sunni core that have been the base of Saddam's hold on power. []

If important individuals in the inner circle or within the Republican Guard are ready to act against him, a coup by these groups with access to him is the most likely scenario. We think a popular revolt is much less likely. []

Indications that a coup attempt is under way or has occurred might include:

- *Dramatic changes in the security situation around Baghdad, particularly the reshuffling of military forces into and out of the city.*
- *Announcements by Baghdad of numerous arrests of senior government or military officials.*
- *A shift in official media coverage to include frequent references to treachery, deceit, and other intrigue.* []

- Iraqi intelligence will become increasingly bold in pursuing Kurdish dissidents inside Iraq and diplomatic defectors and opponents abroad. In recent months, Iraqi operatives probably were responsible for the attempted assassination of prominent Kurdish officials, the poisoning of Iraqi military defectors in the north, and the murder of a former diplomat in Morocco. []

Saddam is playing—to little effect—the theme of Iraq as victim of “Western-Persian-Zionist” conspiracies. He hopes to exploit these propaganda themes to end Baghdad’s diplomatic isolation and ease or end sanctions. So far, however, few countries have returned ambassadors to Baghdad or shown a willingness to violate UN resolutions on trade. (Twenty-four countries, plus the PLO and the Vatican, currently have ambassadors heading missions in Baghdad—roughly one-third of the prewar level.) []